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Author

Forbes, Linda

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UC SAREP helps boost food access, workforce development in Plumas County

by Linda Forbes | <https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=59710>

On a small production farm in Plumas County, the Lost Sierra Food Project (LSFP) increases rural food access and provides workforce development and farm education opportunities while serving as a key community gathering place.

LSFP Executive Director Jessie Mazar credits the Small Grants Program administered by the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program as “a major funding springboard” that supported the establishment and growth of this successful project.

At the core of the LSFP is Rugged Roots Farm, a 2-acre farm that serves as a classroom for technical education and hands-on learning while growing produce for the programs, partnerships and community. Through the Small Grants Program, LSFP has expanded farming education programs, piloted field trips with students from K through sixth grade, and offered a free community cooking and preservation workshop series that was met with great enthusiasm from attendees.

“We have seen a growth in community members and children that feel a sense of ownership in the farm,” said Mazar. “Students returned to farm stands with their parents, guiding them on tours and exclaiming that Rugged Roots Farm was ‘their farm.’”

In 2011, Plumas County farmer Elizabeth Powell received a planning grant from the Small Grants Program to establish the Plumas Sierra Food Council. A community needs assessment conducted by the Council in 2017 outlined priority areas to address in the community including food access and farm education, which led to the establishment of the Lost Sierra Food Project in 2019.

“Projects like LSFP address critical food systems needs in the communities they serve,” said Ruth Dahlquist-Willard, interim director of UC SAREP. “Outcomes of these projects demonstrate that a small investment can go a long way in producing meaningful impacts.”

Programs increase food access and education for underserved communities

LSFP has received two subsequent \$10,000 Small Grants Program grants. With the funding in 2023–2024, they were able to significantly expand K-12 educational programming and establish new partnerships with the Plumas Unified School District.

This continued support has positively affected the regional food system and surrounding rural communities. A high school student intern reflected on summer programming at the farm: “I learned how to harvest things I’d never eaten before, which taught me about how and where food grows. I also learned about teamwork and how to ask for help without embarrassment.”

Improving food access for underserved community members has been highly successful. Through LSFP’s Farm Bucks program, residents get weekly credit at the farm stand in exchange for volunteering nine hours on the farm and participating in three cooking and nutrition classes — or in lieu of volunteering, payment of a subsidized amount.

During this past season, LSFP’s programming reached 724 youth and adults, and they hosted 1,129 hours of volunteer time. Additionally, LSFP donated over 750 pounds of food to local food pantries and wellness centers in 2023.

Grants help with navigating long-term viability challenges

Finding long-term solutions to maintain farm-based programming and staffing is a major challenge for the project. There is a clear community need for this practical knowledge and experience, but there is little economic revenue derived from offering these programs.

Mazar noted that as a nonprofit they can negotiate some of these barriers through grants and individual donations. “Fortunately, through the support of programs like the SAREP Small Grants Program, our team has grown a lot. And new funding opportunities are becoming available,” Mazar said. “With further effort, we hope to amplify the work that has been conducted and expand our reach into adjacent communities.”

Mazar and her team are passionate about achieving the program’s mission to cultivate a regional food system where every community member has access to healthy, affordable food and feels empowered to grow their own produce. They are currently developing a five-year strategic plan as a road map to ensure delivery of programs that meet their goals while supporting their staff.



Students on a field trip at Rugged Roots Farm, a 2-acre farm in Plumas County that serves as a classroom for technical education and hands-on learning while growing produce for the community. *Photo: Lisa Kelly.*